

Indian Rose Annual - IRA 2019

John Sullivan and his rose

Girija and M. S. Viraraghavan

“Ooty is a beautiful jewel in the crown of India”

The name of this lovely hill station, in south India, called the ‘Queen of the Nilgiris’ may have changed from Ootacamund to Uthagamandalam, but everyone knows it by its shortened form, Ooty. But do you know the history of this once summer capital of what used to be the Madras Presidency of British India days? Ooty will celebrate its bicentenary in January 2019. The history of Ooty and modern Nilgiris (the name of the mountains in present day Tamil Nadu of the long Western Ghats range), began when Mr. John Sullivan, of the Indian Civil Service, the then Collector of Coimbatore District (of Madras Presidency) which included the Neilgherries, as the British called them, rode up the heavily forested mountains on horse-back, and reached the area which is now Ooty town, on January 4th 1819. Charmed by the scenery, which he described as resembling Switzerland, he set about, with an ‘extraordinary passion to promote the hills as a sanatorium’.

When I requested Mr. Dharmalingam Venugopal, a retired bank officer, who is a local, and a passionate history buff of these hills, and who runs the Nilgiri Documentation Centre - he has made the house where Sullivan first lived into a Sullivan Museum - he sent me this short note on Sullivan :

“John Sullivan (1788-1855) was an officer of the East India Company who served the Madras Civil Service. His eagerness to find a sanatorium on the hills of the Madras Presidency led to the establishment of the first Hill Station of the British Raj at Ootacamund or Ooty in the Nilgiri Hills in the early 19th century.

He not only created a space for British invalids to regain their health; he also recreated an ‘English’ space on the hills for the visitors to feel at home.

Sullivan was instrumental in introducing the English staples of tea, potato and cabbages on the Nilgiri hills and supplemented them with a wide range of English crops and fruits like oats, wheat, barley, beetroot, turnip, radish, strawberry, peach, pear and apple.

Sullivan set the trend to recreate the English cottages and gardens on the hills by introducing a host of English trees and flowering plants including oak, hemp, flax, vetch, lucerne, geranium, laburnum, heliotrope, violet, mignonette and, last but not the least, rose.

The many faceted contribution of Sullivan earned him the description of 'a rare combination of a magistrate, meteorologist, entrepreneur, town planner, engineer, capitalist, farmer, churchman and protector of the poor'.

The Hill Station founded by Sullivan is approaching its bicentenary as one of the most sought after tourist centres of India attracting no less than three million visitors a year".

In March 2018, Mr. Dharmalingam Venugopal called us up - we had known him from many years back, when he, as part of an environment society called 'Save Nilgiris Campaign' and we, as members of our local environment society, the Palni Hills Conservation Society, were all associated with the 'Save The Western Ghats' initiative, which had environment societies and well known environmentalists across all the states through which this great mountain range runs, associated with its conservation work.

Mr. Venugopal explained that as 2019 was Ooty's bicentenary year, they were planning many events to celebrate the occasion, and events to honour Mr. John Sullivan. As he was a plant and rose lover, they thought it would be a nice idea to have a rose named for him. He wondered if we would be willing to consider having one of Viru's hybrids so named. He left the choice of plant and colour to us. We were happy to accede to his request, and we took many walks around our garden, looking at the rose seedlings. One in good bloom caught our eye. It was one which had caught the eye of our rosarian friend from Ratnagiri, Mr. Anis Giniwale, when he had visited us a couple of years earlier. The plant was just outside our courtyard door leading to the rose garden, in front of a greenhouse, and, framed by the stone doorway, the rich, large purple flowers made a stunning sight. When Anis went up to the plant he was captivated with the fragrance of the blooms. He had asked us if it had a name, and we had said 'No, just a code name'. 'You should release it' he advised us. But we had not, and it was still in the same place and with a beautiful flower on it, as we were doing our reconnaissance, and it seemed to be saying 'Hey, how about me? I need to be named'. So we acquiesced to its entreaty, took photographs and sent them to Mr. Venugopal. He was delighted with the rich deep purple colour and huge size, and when we told him it that it had quite an intoxicating fragrance, he was even more delighted and insisted that this would do John Sullivan proud.

We sent off budwood to the Manager of the Centenary Rose Garden in Ooty and to Mr. Kasturirangan of KSG Roses in Bangalore. The plants are coming along, and hopefully, at the time of the celebration of the Bicentenary, 'Rose Sullivan' will be formally dedicated to the man whose name is synonymous with Ooty. Some of his descendants are expected to attend the function and we hope they will like this rose honouring their illustrious ancestor.

Unfortunately, the parentage of this rose is lost – it is a seedling of many years vintage.

Copies of the original

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